

# Beneath the Mistletoe

The origin of this Christmas custom, much in favor among the lovelorn, goes back to dim past and is lost in traditions of the Druids.

(By IDA M. BRUCE in Utica Globe.)

**W**HEN a young man at a Christmas party leads, with an attempt at nonchalance, some charming young lady beneath a bough of mistletoe in order to win a "mistletoe kiss" he is of the opinion that he is luring the young lady into a situation where, by the decree of an ancient custom, she must forfeit the aforesaid kiss.

Frankness compels me to confess that the luring is done by the young lady. For their Christmas parties they secure and suspend the mistletoe and she is indeed a most sedate and rather chilling young person who will not, during the festivities, allow herself to be "tired" beneath the mistletoe. And all this is quite within her rights. It is a custom she inherited from ancestors who dwelt in Britain or Scandinavia, centuries ago. Today the mistletoe and the mistletoe kiss are associated only with Christmas. But, in truth, mistletoe had its significance centuries before the birth in Bethlehem which gave us Christmas.

Scandinavians claim that mistletoe customs originated with them, but there is an English legend antedating those of Scandinavia, which tells how the girls of semibarbaric Britain, in the golden age of the Druids, did themselves hang up boughs of mistletoe and lure young men into their embrace.

According to this legend Chelm, an ancient high priest, had a great temple in the forest where he taught young men to become priests. So popular did this temple become that half the young men of the countryside were leaving their homes and people, and becoming Druid priests.

There was great need of the young men in the camps to hunt and fish and to plant, and, above all, there were so many more maidens than young men left that they decided something must be done to reclaim them. The girls sought an ancient witch and asked her help.

"Pick yonder mistletoe that grows without roots upon the trees, go to the edge of the forest round about the tree temple of Chelm and hang it there all around and about the forest. Stand in waiting there, well hidden, until the young men coming forth from the forest each night to bring food to the temple, are under the mistletoe, then step forth. They will clasp you and kiss you whereupon do you scream right lustily and the young men shall be yours."

**How the Girls Won Back the Men.**  
The maidens followed this advice and hung the mistletoe in festoons about the edge of the forest. Standing under it, the young men felt impelled to kiss the maidens who stepped forth to greet them. The maidens, as instructed, screamed lustily and Chelm and other of the old Druid priests rushed forth, fearing their young men were being murdered. When the good old Druids saw the young men embracing the maidens they drove them away, for they would have no one among them who had taught to do with women.

And so, through the peculiar influence of the mistletoe, the maidens won back the young men, but the custom of hanging up mistletoe was kept up. Later after the introduction of Christianity, the custom was added to the Christmas festivities.

## Christmas Festivities.

From Scandinavian mythology comes the weird but interesting story of the origin of mistletoe, that pale-berried parasite of the forest. One of the best of these legends is that of Baldur, son of Wodin, in the days when those strange gods are said to have walked and talked with the mortals on earth, as did Jupiter and Apollo and Diana and Latona and the other gods and goddesses of Olympus.

Baldur was the Scandinavian god of sunshine and summer and was naturally beloved by all except Loki, the god of hearth fires. For, while the people rushed out of doors to see Baldur when he brought the summer sun, they had no use for Loki until the next winter, consequently Loki disliked Baldur.

Nanna, goddess of the blossoms and wife of Baldur, dreamed terrible dreams of the death of Baldur, and she went to the great god Wodin, her father-in-law, and told him and he was greatly troubled. But messengers were sent forth throughout the world

and had everything swear to do Baldur no harm. Everything animate and inanimate, the animals and men and fish and birds, the water and earth and rocks and trees, the winds and clouds and rain and snow, all agreed never to harm Baldur.

"Go forth and weep no more, daughter," said Wodin to Nanna, "no harm can now come to your husband, my son," and Nanna went forth happy.

After that all the gods used to amuse themselves hurling stones and axes and spears at Baldur and he stood and laughed at them, because neither wood nor petal nor anything could harm him. It was great sport for everyone. One day while at this sport an old woman asked Nanna why they were trying to kill Baldur.

"Everything has promised never to harm him," she explained.

"Everything?" queried the old woman.

"Except the mistletoe, what can that little shrub do?" Nanna laughed scornfully.

The old woman hurried away. Of course it was Loki in disguise. She got a twig of mistletoe and hardened it by charring the outside before the fire, fitted the point to a lance and hurled it at Baldur, whereupon it pierced his heart and he fell dead.

## Dedicated to Love and Affection.

As a peace offering the gods dedicated the mistletoe to love and affection and peace just so long as it never touched Loki's territory, the ground. Ever since then the mistletoe has grown without roots, far away from the ground, and even to this day it is used by suspending it above the floor or ground.

And so it is that both ancient Britain and Scandinavia lay their claim to mistletoe customs and the origin of suspending a branch of it beneath which youth may kiss. There is little doubt but what the custom was in use a thousand years before the origin of Christmas. While the story of the maidens who lured back to their camps, and to themselves, the young men who were about to become Druid priests, gives good account of our custom of kissing beneath the mistletoe today, to Scandinavia also belongs much credit. When those brave and romantic Scandinavians looked forward to Valhalla as their heaven, and worshiped the gods Thor and Wodin on Thor's day and Wodin's day (which is where we get our Thursday and Wednesday), they used to have certain great feast days for their gods.

It became the custom, on observing Thor's day, to build great fires. These were called "Jutul" fires. As everyone knows, the Scandinavian "J" is pronounced quite like our pronunciation of the letter "Y," consequently those fires were spoken of as "Yule" fires.

The brighter the fires, the higher the flames towered through the forests where the Scandinavians used to gather to pay honor to the great god Thor, the greater pleased was Thor, and so it became necessary to pick out the best of wood to burn.

Then men would go into the forest looking for "Jutul" logs, and they soon learned that the trees upon which much mistletoe hung would give the brightest fires. They did not know the reason for this, and believed that it was due to the work of the great Thor himself who caused the mistletoe to grow on those trees without roots solely as a means of letting his people know which trees were best for burning in his honor.

And so whenever anyone met under the mistletoe in the great forests, no matter how great enemies they were, they dropped their weapons and greeted each other kindly, nor would they take up arms against each other until the sunrise of another day. This was their tribute in memory of Thor.

## A Fetish of Good Luck.

They began to take bits of the mistletoe into their homes and hang it over the doorways, and if any enemies came, they could not enter the houses beneath the mistletoe without becoming friends to the people inside so long as they remained there. From this came the habit of greeting people who stepped under the mistletoe with an embrace or a kiss, and at great indoor feasts the mistletoe was hung up in the room and the people greeted each other with kisses.

Later this mistletoe hanging at feasts came to be put in use only at the Christmas feast and from that grew the custom of hanging up the

mistletoe in order that any standing beneath it might be kissed by the first person who caught her there.

Few if any growing things are the subject of as many ancient legends, customs and beliefs as the mistletoe. The fact that the ancient Celts in their druidical religion had two great festivals, one in June and the other in December, the latter being equivalent to our Christmas. In both of these great festivals the gathering of the mistletoe was a sacred rite.

Pliny in his Natural History describes the ceremony. Speaking of the Druids' worship of the oak, he says: "They believe that whatever grows on these trees is sent from heaven and is a sign that the tree has been chosen by the God himself. The mistletoe is very rarely to be met with, but when it is found they gather it with solemn ceremony. This they do especially on the sixth day of the moon, because by the sixth day the moon has plenty of vigor and has not run half its course."

"After the preparations have been made for a sacrifice and a feast under the tree they halt it as the universal healer and bring to the spot two white bulls whose horns have never been bound before. A priest, clad in a white robe, climbs the tree and with a golden sickle cuts the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloth. Then they sacrifice the victims, praying that God may make his own gift to prosper with those upon whom he has bestowed it."

"They believe that a potion prepared from mistletoe will increase their flocks and that the plant is a remedy against all poison."

It was believed to be a remedy for many ills and this belief is still to be found in many remote places in Europe. In Holstein, for example, the mistletoe is regarded as a healing remedy for wounds and in Lucerne, France, it is always administered by the native people as an antidote for poison. They apply the plant to the stomach of the patient and give him a solution of it to drink as well. The Gaelic word for mistletoe is "an t'all loe," which means "all healer," and this is probably what the Druids called it in ancient times.

In the northeast of Scotland people used to cut withes of mistletoe at the March full moon; these they bent in circles and kept for a year to cure hectic fevers and other troubles. In some parts of Germany the mistletoe is especially esteemed as a remedy for the ailments of children, who sometimes wear it hung around the neck as an amulet.

In Sweden on midsummer eve mistletoe is diligently sought after, the people believing it to be possessed of many mystic qualities, and that if a sprig of it is attached to the ceiling of the dwelling house, the horse's stall or cow's crib, the "trolls" or evil spirits will then be powerless to injure either man or beast. Branches of the plant are commonly seen in farmhouses hanging from the ceiling to protect the dwellings from all harm, but especially from fire, and persons afflicted with the falling sickness think they can ward off all attacks of the malady by carrying about with them a knife which has a handle of mistletoe.

A Swedish remedy for other complaints is to hang a sprig of mistletoe round the sufferer's neck or to make him wear on his finger a ring made from the plant. Moreover they fashion divining rods of mistletoe or of four different kinds of wood, one of which must be mistletoe. The treasure seeker places the rod on the ground after sundown and when it rests directly over the treasure the rod begins to move as if it were alive.

Like their Swedish neighbors, many German peasants consider the mistletoe a powerful charm against evil spirits.

An expedition of Norwegian scientists is studying the native flora and fauna of almost unknown regions of Northern and Central Asia.

Experiments in the Philippines in crossing native and Connecticut tobacco have produced a variety selling for more than twice the price of the native.

For producing decorative light effects rubber balloons have been invented into which electric lamps can be inserted and the balloons distended with air.

Experimenting with simple apparatus, a California doctor has sent wireless messages through the ground for distances up to 40 miles.

Worn deflated under the coat, a French inventor's life preserver is inflated and made ready for use by inserting a capsule of highly compressed air.

Patents have been granted a Chicago woman for candy made and wrapped in the form of artificial flowers, which can be eaten after serving in bouquets.



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### ODDS AND ENDS

New tongs for sugar or candy are mounted at the end of a tubular handle and are operated by a spring controlled plunger.

The Philippine Islands have about 30,000 square miles of virgin forest and about 20,000 square miles of second growth timber.

Scientific experiments have demonstrated that the yellow color of cream and butter is not necessarily an indication of their richness.